



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**IDENTITY AND SUSTAINABILITY OF 'CHUANGZUO'
MUSIC MOVEMENTS AS OBSERVED THROUGH CASE
STUDIES ON 'GONGZUOFANG' MUSI GROUPS IN
PENANG, MALAYSIA**

CHOW OW WEI

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By

CHOW OW WEI

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

December 2008



Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in
fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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December 2008

Chairman: Chan Cheong Jan, D.Lit., PhD

Faculty: Human Ecology

Chuangzuo has emerged as a music trend through a music movement, and as a popular culture for youth in Malaysia, but the music of *chuangzuo* have not been described to the general public that is probably not aware of the identity in *chuangzuo*, the social aspects of *chuangzuo* as in a *gongzuofang*, and also how the music has sustained so far.

The primary objective of this study is to determine the identity and the sustainability of *chuangzuo* activities in Malaysia. The specific objectives are to produce a description on the settings of *gongzuofang* in Penang, an analysis of musical materials of *chuangzuo*, and a clarification of the identity and sustainability of *chuangzuo* based on the former two specific objectives.

Observation through fieldwork is rendered for this ethnographic research. The primary setting is *gongzuofang* in Penang, namely the Wanderers and CZMusic which have been actively involved in *chuangzuo* activities. Observation, interviews and video recordings of important rehearsals and actual performance were rendered. The secondary setting of the fieldwork is based on related song-writing competitions, concerts and music camp, which were held in Penang and Kuala Lumpur.

The general phenomenon of *chuangzuo* depicts a scene where youth perform their own music compositions with guitars or light instruments. *Chuangzuo* is a music activity for the youth in Malaysia, as the music, mainly performed in Chinese, often depicts the youth's life-cycle events. The music is commonly composed in the sentimental style or of a ballad that usually adopts a major key and the common simple quadruple time. Instrumentation is usually simple, and Chinese texts with rhymes are used. Though mixed language and vocables are included sometimes, the texts are commonly written in the discursive style.

A *gongzuofang* is the basic unit of *chuangzuo* that accommodates youth's music activities. It exists as an important space for music practice, music-learning, idea-sharing, planning, music presentation, socialisation, and also life-cycle events. The studied *gongzuofang* represents a typical organisation that provides its members with abundant opportunities in music

compositions, as members learn to compose, perform, compete in music contests and produce music concerts or music recording.

Chuangzuo is an opportunity for youth to engage with music. They usually adopt elements of cultural fusion in their compositions, and they show amateurish characteristics in their music. This has formed the musical identity of *chuangzuo*. The social identity of *chuangzuo* is built through identity construction, individuality, communion formation and aspiration. Nevertheless, the need to survive changes for the long term has triggered the implementation of sustainability in the handling of *chuangzuo*. The sustainable ways, as observed, are organisation, commercialisation, hegemony and exclusion of certain music genres.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Izajah Master Sains

**IDENTITI DAN KELESTARIAN GERAKAN MUZIK
'CHUANGZUO' YANG DIPERHATIKAN MELALUI
KAJIAN KES KE ATAS KUMPULAN MUZIK
'GONGZUOFANG' DI PULAU PINANG, MALAYSIA**

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Chuangzuo telah muncul sebagai suatu trend muzik melalui gerakan muzik, dan juga sebagai budaya popular untuk pemuda-pemudi di Malaysia. Namun, muzik *chuangzuo* tidak diperkenalkan kepada awam. Boleh dikatakan bahawa identiti *chuangzuo*, aspek-aspek social *chuangzuo* dalam *gongzuofang*, dan kelestarian muzik belum diketahui.

Tujuan utama kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti identiti dan kelestarian aktiviti-aktiviti *chuangzuo* di Malaysia. Objektif spesifik termasuk menghasilkan diskripsi tentang keadaan *gongzuofang* di Pulau Pinang, analisis terhadap bahan muzik *chuangzuo*, dan penerangan tentang identiti dan kelestarian *chuangzuo* berdasarkan dua objektif spesifik yang tersebut.

Pemerhatian melalui kerja lapangan dilaksanakan untuk kajian etnografik ini. Penempatan utama ialah *gongzuofang* di Pulau Pinang, iaitu the Wanderers and CZMusic yang masih aktif dalam aktiviti-aktiviti *chuangzuo*. Dalam kerja lapangan, pemerhatian, temuduga dan perakaman video dilaksanakan semasa raptai-raptai penting dan persembahan-persembahan utama. Penempatan sekunder kerja lapangan adalah berdasarkan pertandingan gubahan lagu, konsert dan kem muzik yang diadakan di Pulau Pinang dan Kuala Lumpur.

Fenomena *chuangzuo* biasanya digambarkan dengan adegan di mana pemuda-pemudi mempersembahkan karya muzik mereka dengan gitar atau alat muzik ringan. *Chuangzuo* merupakan aktiviti muzik untuk pemuda di Malaysia. Muzik yang dimainkan terutamanya dalam bahasa Cina dan biasanya menggambarkan peristiwa kehidupan pemuda. Karya muzik biasanya merupakan lagu sentimental atau balada yang mempunyai nada major dan masa empat rentak. Instrumentasi biasanya ringkas, dan teks bahasa Cina dengan kata berima digunakan. Walaupun kadang kala bahasa campuran dan vokabel dimasukkan, teks biasanya ditulis dengan gaya yang merewang.

Gongzuofang merupakan unit asas bagi *chuangzuo* sebagai aktiviti pemuda-pemudi. Ia muncul sebagai ruang penting untuk latihan muzik, pembelajaran muzik, perkongsian ide, perancangan, persembahan muzik,

sosialisasi dan juga peristiwa kehidupan. *Gongzuofang* dalam kajian ini melambangkan pertubuhan tipikal yang memberi peluang berlebihan kepada ahli-ahli dalam bidang karya muzik, sementara ahli-ahli belajar untuk menggubah lagu, memberi persembahan muzik, menyertai pertandingan gubahan lagu dan menerbit persembahan konsert dan rakaman muzik.

Chuangzuo adalah suatu peluang untuk pemuda-pemudi bertempur dalam muzik. Secara umum, mereka menggunakan unsur-unsur muzik bercorak pelbagai budaya dalam karya mereka, dan sifat amaturnya boleh diperlihatkan daripada hasil karya mereka. Ini menyumbang dalam pembentukan identiti muzikal *chuangzuo*. Identiti social *chuangzuo* terbentuk melalui pembinaan identiti, keindividuan, pembentukan perhimpunan dan aspirasi. Namun, keperluan untuk terus hidup dalam perubahan telah mengimplikasikan proses kelestarian dalam pengendalian *chuangzuo*. Melalui pemerhatian, cara-cara kelestarian adalah melalui organisasi, komersialisasi, hegemoni dan pengecualian daripada jenis-jenis muzik tertentu.

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I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 24 December 2008 to conduct the final examination of Chow Ow Wei on his thesis entitled "Identity and Sustainability of 'Chuangzuo' Music Movements as Observed Through Case Studies on 'Gongzuofang' Music Groups in Penang, Malaysia" in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P.U.(A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Science.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or other institutions.



CHOW OW WEI

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Since the 1980s, a phenomenal music genre seems to initiate an influence in local Chinese popular music. This influence has affected Chinese youth engaging with music, and has undoubtedly changed the way music is perceived, conceived, consumed and applied in Malaysia. This music trend, perceptibly, has a typical fashion: young people compose music, and in reality perform their music compositions at public stages with guitars as the accompaniment to the vocalists. Seemingly as if a common scene at a campus of an institution, the music has a particular characteristic in terms of musical styles, performance and cultural context, and therefore it is distinguished from other musical genres. This typical musical genre is often referred as *chuangzuo yinyue*, or *chuangzuo* music [*chuangzuo* herein after]. In the 1990s, *chuangzuo* emerged as an important youth culture in Malaysia, especially when *chuangzuo* activities gained popularity through constant supports from commercial organisations, local newspapers and also the state apparatus.

The consumption of Chinese popular music in Malaysia is particularly interesting, as Malaysian Chinese usually adopted the taste from the pan-Chinese. Since the pre-war era, Chinese popular music was usually brought into

the Malaysia through production companies from Shanghai, Taiwan and Hong Kong, although Chinese popular music was also popularised by a number of local Chinese artistes in the 1960s and 1970s. Continuous, enormous import of Chinese popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan claimed its extensive dominance and influence since the late 1970s.

However, the awareness of 'locality' was awakened with the introduction of the idea of *chuangzuo* in the late 1980s. This has raised a great awareness in the making of local music compositions, which can be written, performed and produced by local 'down-to-earth' people who are not professional composers and song-writers. *Chuangzuo* also animated many sentiments and enthusiasm in the manifesto of 'locality'. The popularity of *chuangzuo* reached its peak in the first half of the 1990s with a few *chuangzuo* song-writing competitions. Moreover, commercial record companies attempted the production of *chuangzuo* music albums, while some popularised the artistes who recorded and performed *chuangzuo*. In the late 1990s, many *chuangzuo*-affiliated Malaysian artistes were brought into the pan-Chinese popular music scene through local channels and gained popularity.

A basic unit where *chuangzuo* is practised is usually called a *gongzuofang*. *Gongzuofang* plays a major role in running all activities related to *chuangzuo*. Regular activities that are organised internally maintain constant activeness

within the *gongzuofang*, whereas major activities such as a music concert [*fabiao hui*] register reputation and popularity among youth in Malaysia. A *gongzuofang* sometimes join forces with organisations from commercial or related sectors to organise big-scaled activities such as song-writing competition, music camp and recording production for music albums.

With the application of the recently advanced method in information technology, there is also a trend where people engaged with *chuangzuo* record their own music albums at home. The music recording is highly independent from marketing strategies and sales manipulation in the mainstream. This DIY [do-it-yourself] album is often produced for the purpose of self-satisfaction, but many would post this recording as a 'demo' tape to leading record companies, hoping to gain the attention from the popular music industry.

1.2 Statement of Problem

Chuangzuo is a type of music performed by youth in Malaysia. Though it somehow gains the attention of the public through mass media, it is still almost unknown to academic researches. In his dissertation, Lee W. K. (2002) has seriously examined the cultural context of *chuangzuo* 15 years after the establishment of the '*Chuangzuo Movement*', but there has still not a systematic description about the music until now, and not to mention the lack of any kind

of exploration into the identity of the musical sound of *chuangzuo* or how the music has sustained through the course of time.

Besides, as a youth music activity, *chuangzuo* has not been seriously studied as both a music genre and a social organisation [*gongzuofang*]. There are still no researches that can answer to the questions such as what makes *chuangzuo* a music genre, what youth seek with their engagement with *chuangzuo* activities, where their passion lie on and how *chuangzuo* lasts.

Specifically, this dissertation intends to answer the following questions: (1) What is the identity of *chuangzuo*? (2) How this identity is being sustained through the period of time? Further questions can be asked from the two main questions above. Concerning the first question, how different is *chuangzuo* from other Chinese popular music? What social identity is constructed through the operation of *gongzuofang*? Concerning the second question, how the unity of musical ideas, if any, is preserved through time in *gongzuofang*? How does *gongzuofang* ensure the sustainability of *chuangzuo* against social and environmental changes?

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to determine the identity and the sustainability of *chuangzuo* activities in Malaysia. The specific objectives are to